

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

RARE BOOKS

I. SCOPE

This overview describes the holdings of the Rare Books and Special Collections Division (RBSCD) of the Library of Congress. It excludes rare books and manuscripts in the custody of other Library divisions, such as the Music Division, the Asian Division, or the African and Middle Eastern Division.

In general, all materials printed before 1801 fall into the scope of RBSCD. Although the division's materials come into its custody for a variety of reasons – age, rarity, monetary value, importance in the history of printing, historic binding, provenance or association interest, fragility, uniqueness or scarcity – they have one point in common: the collections document at a research level the traditions of thought and learning and the social life and customs of Europe and the Americas.

II. SIZE

The Rare Book and Special Collections Division's holdings amount to approximately 800,000 books, broadsides, pamphlets, theater programs and playbills, title pages, prints, posters, photographs, and medieval and Renaissance manuscripts.

III. GENERAL RESEARCH STRENGTHS

The Division selects rare materials and special collections covering all eras and subjects, focusing on original printed sources in the following areas: the fifteenth-century book and the history of printing, European social and intellectual history, the Reformation, the history of science, travels and voyages, the illustrated book, Mesoamerica and the encounter, Americana, selected English and American authors, the fine press tradition, the contemporary artist's book, subject themes and formats such as gastronomy and magic, and special format books such as miniature books. Criteria for the selection of rare materials and special collections include especially their long-term scholarly importance and their value as editions of a given work. Many collections of major rarities are supported by an associated group of materials, combining to give collection depth and strength.

Included in the holdings are nearly 8,000 incunabula, the largest such grouping in the Western Hemisphere. The extraordinary Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection on the History of the Illustrated Book, one of the premiere collections at the Library, documents the illustrated book from its medieval origins to the present. It is supported by strong Renaissance and Reformation collections.

The significant holdings of Americana date from Aztec and Maya objects and vessels to a Columbus letter (1493) to the present. These holdings include: the Jay I. Kislak Collection of over 4,000 books, documents, objects and artifacts documenting the early Americas, more than 16,000 American imprints from 1640 to 1800; extensive holdings of western Americana, Confederate States publications; and thousands of nineteenth-century works.

IV. AREAS OF DISTINCTION

The division maintains well over 100 separate collections (see “A List of Selected Special Collections” on the Rare Book and Special Collections Reading Room’s website). The collections can be described in general categories such as:

- Personal libraries (Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Susan B. Anthony, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Frederic W. Goudy, Bruce Rogers, and Harry Houdini);
- Comprehensive author collections: (Walt Whitman, Henry James, Sigmund Freud, Rudyard Kipling, Benjamin Franklin, and Hans Christian Andersen);
- Subject collections: (magic, gastronomy, cryptography, suffrage, radical literature, papermaking, Sir Francis Drake, the Jesuits, the French Revolution, and Abraham Lincoln);
- Language: (early Russian, Bulgarian, and Hawaiian imprints);
- The illustrated and fine press book (the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Artists' Books, the Victor Hammer Archive, the Janus Press Archive, the Fine Press collection);
- Collections with unusual provenance (the Russian Imperial Collection, Third Reich Collection);
- Genre collections: (miniature books, artists’ books, Bibles, American children’s books, broadsides, theater playbills and programs, pre-1871 copyright records,, documents of the first fourteen Congresses, and dime novels).

In addition to these special groupings, the general or classified collection--about one-third of the holdings--reflects the division's strength and mirrors every subject that the Library of Congress as a whole collects.

V. ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

The Rare Book and Special Collections Division is an active participant in the Library’s digital efforts, and its materials are readily available on the web in digital form. From the Library’s Gutenberg Bible to complete collections, digital files of RBSCD materials can be found on the

Division's homepage. Catalogues for the Jefferson Collection and the Francis Drake Collection are available, as are numerous works in the Rosenwald Collection, the Kislak Collection and various subject and format collections. All can be found in the section "Online Collections."

VI. WEAKNESSES/EXCLUSIONS

The Library's rare American and British literature holdings are not comprehensive and this may seem strange to the outsider, but historical reasons exist for this situation. Early Library reports, for instance, observed that "the American literature collections are weak in relation to the collections of American historical material." Until the 1940s much of the American and British literature up to the first half of the twentieth century remained in the general collections, where the books were subjected to extensive use and consequent damage. The first attempt at upgrading the literature collections came in 1943 when Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish launched a program of transferring to the Rare Book Division the works of twenty-seven living American writers. The division now has similar collections for several hundred important British and American authors, and for a selection of important small literary presses. The acquisition of the archives of the Poetry Project signal a new effort on the part of the Division to document at a research level American poetry of the 20th century. Contemporary mass market paperbacks, mostly in genres such as romance, historical fiction, mysteries, horror, science fiction, and some young adult fiction series are collected by the division.